

THE HMONG LANGUAGE IN WISCONSIN BY S.M. BURT AND M. RATLIFF

Burt, S.M., & Ratliff, M. (2010). *The Hmong Language in Wisconsin: Language Shift and Pragmatic Change*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press. List price: \$109.95

Reviewed by
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In her book *The Hmong Language in Wisconsin*, Dr. Susan Burt collects and analyzes linguistic evidence that demonstrates a shift in language behavior between the older and the younger generation of Hmong immigrants to Wisconsin. Using recorded interviews and production questionnaires, the author documents the various speech act strategies available to Hmong speakers to request help or food, express gratitude, and enact a refusal in male-female interaction, but the main aim of this text is the analysis of generational differences in language use and pragmatic choices. Dr. Burt focuses on how the younger generation, in contrast to elderly speakers within this language community, has adopted the use of specific native-language items to accomplish these tasks. Further, she shows how younger speakers have adopted new pragmatic strategies to perform relational tasks. Using the term "pragmalinguistic change" (p. 225), Dr. Burt employs Johanson's theoretical framework of "code-copying" (p. 28) to interpret these generations-based differences in language and pragmatic choices as being the result of the younger speakers' exposure to the English host language and its pragmatic strategies. The text also demonstrates how this English-driven influence on the speech and speech act choices of the younger generation is perceived, focusing specifically on how the reflections by the community are connected to notions of language purism.

In the first part of her book, the author presents statistical and interview-based evidence for the different choices made by older and younger Hmong speakers, demonstrating a visible shift both in regards to pragmatic as well as linguistic choices. She provides data that gives instances of how young Hmong speakers contrast with the elderly, for example by exhibiting a "dramatically increased [...] frequency" (p. 104) of the use of the particle *thov*, a word chosen from a group of other alternatives due to its great semantic similarity to the English *please*. Similarly, the author's data and subsequent analyses show that young Hmong speakers differ from the elderly in regards to metapragmatic attitudes, as well as notions of obligations and norms of interactions between different age groups. The text provides data that indicate the extent to which "American English politeness teachings have affected [...] understanding of usage conventions in Hmong" (p. 96) and shows that the younger generation has at its disposal a smaller range of language and language behavior choices. To demonstrate how both groups are keenly aware of this in-process cultural-linguistic shift in the use of the Hmong language, the text recounts metapragmatic commentary provided by the two generations about their perceptions and evaluations of this visible pragmatic change, connecting it to notions of language purism.

In the second part of the book, the text examines the relationship between changing gender roles in the Hmong community and the adoption of new verbal practices by young female and male Hmong speakers. The text employs Pavlenko's model of gender and language change, which holds that the desirability of gender ideologies in a target culture can motivate or discourage the adoption of new language practices. In combination with Grice's Cooperative Principle, the author uses this theoretical approach to analyze the ways in which the younger generation of Hmong speakers uses their native language in a different manner to both reflect and take advantage of the different gender roles offered by the host culture they encounter in Wisconsin. Chapter 4 specifically focuses on how different groups within the Hmong immigrant community take different approaches to refusing a man's

courting advances; through theory and interview-based data, the text reveals how the younger Hmong women, having grown up or at least having been acculturated in Wisconsin, face a social reality that, in comparison to traditional Hmong society, affords them greater control over the dating process and choice of partner. In the same chapter, the text refers to culture and gender studies to draw out the connection between the changing sociocultural reality within the Hmong immigrant society in Wisconsin and the resulting changes in language use patterns and pragmatic choices.

In the final chapters of the text, the author closely examines examples of Hmong-American expressive literature (Va-Megn Thoj's play "Hmoob Boy meets Hmong Girl" and Ka Vang's short story "The Good Hmong Girl") to depict a young generation of Hmong-American writers that is astutely aware and consciously processing the changing language strategies available to and used by young Hmong-Americans. Dr. Burt uses the creative product of Hmong writers to demonstrate an ongoing associative shift within the Hmong community, a process in which "a value or practice is assigned an association with one or two cultures in contact," (p. 213). Specifically focusing on how refusal in male-female courting situations is portrayed and to what effect the Romanized Popular Alphabet is used in Hmong writing, the author concisely reveals how the young Hmong-American immigrants exist in and create an identity out of the space they occupy between "traditional" Hmong and "modern" American societal structures, in the process showing a shift in what it means to speak, write and be Hmong. Dr. Burt's analysis of pragmatic and linguistic behaviors in Va-Megn Thoj's play demonstrates the tensions that arise out of a bi-cultural situation in which, "with spelling conventions as links, Hmong language and practices are indexed with maleness," while the "English language and American practices are indexed with femaleness." (p. 210) By doing this, the text shows that the choices available to young Hmong immigrants in Wisconsin create a conflict that finds an outlet in the associative shift experienced by young Hmong-Americans; as Hmong and American notions of gender and tradition are re-negotiated by the younger generation, the Hmong and American language codes and speech acts associated with either cultural spectrum gain a new indexical framework and are re-interpreted. Thus, the text uses both theory and collected data to demonstrate how the younger generation of Hmong immigrants, by shifting indexical relations and re-shaping the use of their native language, overtly use pragmatic strategies, language items and even writing systems to enact an immigrant identity that is comprised of indexed notions of gender, "Hmong-ness," Western identity and age.

REVIEWER

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